

APPLICATION OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND OR FOREIGN LANGUAGE AND ITS EFFECTS IN INDIAN SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to tackle some issues that are not yet fully addressed in the application of cooperative learning in English as a Second or Foreign Language teaching in India. It aims to study the process and effects of cooperative learning; to make a practical study to bring together the fields of cooperative learning, second language acquisition, and second/foreign language teaching to create optimal schooling experiences for the EFL high school learners, and to integrate cooperative learning with the theories from the second language acquisition, i.e. the comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985), the comprehensible output (Swain, 1985), and the interaction in context (Kagan, 1995), as well as affecting motivation during the process of implementation (Gardener, 1985).

KEYWORDS: Cooperative Learning, Second Language Acquisition, Comprehensible Input, The Comprehensible Output, The Interaction and Context, and the Affective Domain of Motivation

INTRODUCTION

“Individual commitment to a group effort: this is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, and a civilization work.” - Vinci Lombardi

Many researchers have documented that cooperative learning in a language classroom initiates communication. Every student in the group makes an effort and contributes for the group as seen in a football team wherein all players cooperate for a single cause. In the past few decades, the communicative language teaching, or the communicative approach, has been overwhelmingly acknowledged by many scholars like Celce-Murcia, Thurrell and Huang (1995) as the main stream in ESL/EFL teaching. The focus of language teaching also expands from “the teacher-centered manipulation of discrete grammatical structures to the student-centered acquisition of communicative competence.” Experts in communicative approach like Savignon (1983) suggest that contextualized and meaningful communication is the best possible practice that language learners can engage in. As conceived by social and cognitive psychologists Piaget, Bruner, Vygotsky, Lewin, and others, the social constructivist theories of how people learn have contributed greatly to the development of CL practices used in schools today.

However, according to Mangubhai and Prabhu such approach has not established a foothold in the English education in India, though there has been a very high demand for oral fluency. The Bangalore Project or Communicational Teaching Project by Prabhu in 1987, some researchers like Jangid and Vijaya (2005) at CIEFL in Hyderabad, and a good number of researchers have stressed the need for a balance of explicit skills instruction and a strongly meaningful language-learning environment through cooperative learning. In line with Chen’s observation, Huang also claims that

although the idea of developing communicative competence as the ultimate goal of foreign language teaching has been around for nearly three decades. He says, “There is little consensus in the existing literature as to how such skill can be developed in formal classroom settings, and whether this objective is attainable in places where the target language is not used for communication.”

In spite of the call for communicative approach in EFL teaching, however, as many researchers noted, the traditional *teacher-centered Grammar Translation Method* is still the dominant stream in English classrooms in India. This is a fact accepted by the most teachers working in local medium schools. In such a traditional classroom, according to *Krishnan and Pandit* (2003) the teacher dominates the floor of speaking throughout the classroom session, and the students simply sit and listen. The students seldom initiate talking in the classroom.

Several studies made by *Ham and Adams* (1982), *Liang* (2002) and other educational reports have pointed out that the solitary models of the traditional teaching and translation methods tend to make students overly passive and indifferent to what is being taught. The traditional whole-class lecturing method is found to be one of the major causes of the generally low English proficiency and the declining interest of English learning in India according to *Prabhu* (1987) and *Mangubhai* (1983). Some researchers feel, only few EFL College learners in India are able to master English, even after five years of studying the target language at High School and two years of learning in Junior Colleges (Grade 11-12). They also state that after seven years of learning English, most Indian students (from local medium Schools and Junior Colleges) are unable to communicate in English because there has been too much teaching and too little learning in a traditional classroom.

In a situation like this in India, where there is every need for incorporating a student-centred communicative syllabus and curriculum, one should think of the practical alternatives to replace the traditional method so that the students can achieve communicative competence. The question arises, ‘What level should their teachers address in a large class of more than 35 heterogeneous students?’

The study undertaken brings together the fields of the application of cooperative learning, second language acquisition, as well as second or foreign language teaching to create optimal learning experiences that are beneficial for the students in general and specifically the students in high schools in India. It is hoped that this empirical study made after having taught English as a second or foreign language for seventeen years in India and eight years overseas (Oman & Thailand) can provide a close link between *Cooperative Learning* and *the Communicative Language Teaching*. This is possible by integrating cooperative learning with the theories from the second language acquisition, *i.e., the comprehensible input, the comprehensible output, the interaction and context, and the affective domain of motivation*. The result is that students promote one another’s success (helping, assisting, supporting, encouraging, and praising one another’s efforts to learn language) face to face. Doing so entails cognitive processes such as verbally explaining how to solve problems, teaching one’s knowledge to classmates, and connecting present with past learning. It may also lead to such interpersonal processes as challenging one another’s reasoning and conclusions, modeling, and facilitating efforts to learn.

The truth of this assertion can be seen in the rich theory, research, and practice surrounding Cooperative Learning. There can now be little doubt that Cooperative Learning is appropriate to High School education in India. While it is never easy to implement, when all the critical elements are in place, it is very powerful. This paper reviews the theory underlying

the use of Cooperative Learning conducted at the High School level, and the ways it may be used appropriately in High School classes.

Based upon Brown's (1994) belief that "Cooperative learning is embraced within a communicative language teaching framework," this paper features the task-based and activity-oriented techniques of cooperative learning in an English programme, hoping to transform the traditional knowledge-based English class to a more communicative and humanistic learning context. The present paper attempts to answer the following research questions:

- What are the processes and the effects of application of cooperative learning on the improvement of the EFL learners' language learning in terms of oral communicative competence and the school monthly achievement tests?
- What are the effects of cooperative learning on the EFL/ESL learners' motivation towards learning English as a foreign language?
- What are the effects of the application of cooperative learning method on the high/low achievers in a heterogeneous class?
- What role does the teacher have to play in applying cooperative learning method in the teaching process?

This paper also aims at proposing guidelines for English as Foreign Language teachers who wish to apply cooperative learning to enhance their students' proficiency in English as well as motivation for learning English. It discusses the importance of different approaches and the theories underlying Cooperative Learning. The application of cooperative learning to classroom teaching finds its root in the 1970s when Israel, the United States and some other countries began to design and study cooperative learning models for classroom context. Now cooperative learning is applied in almost all school content areas and, increasingly, in college and university contexts all over the world, and is claimed to be an effective teaching method in foreign/second language education by scholars. It is generally asserted that application of cooperative learning in teaching English as a second language is the best option for all students because it emphasizes active interaction between the students of diverse abilities and backgrounds.

Application of Cooperative Learning in Teaching English as a Foreign or Second Language in India is the main concern. Although most research findings point to the positive influence of cooperative learning on academic achievements, social behavior, and affective development many English as a Foreign Language high school teachers in India, still find difficulty in incorporating this system of instructional method in their classroom. In addition, little attention has been given to the investigation of the effects of the application of cooperative learning on the EFL high school learners' verbal and non-verbal communicative competence, the EFL students' motivation towards learning English, and the high and low achievers studying together in heterogeneous classes. Moreover, as suggested by Johnson & Johnson, (1989) a teacher's familiarity with the application of cooperative learning could affect the results of such teaching method. Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to design a cooperative learning program and then conduct an experimental study to test its validity and feasibility of implementation in high schools English curriculum or courses in India.

Cooperative Learning: Elements, Methods and Theories

In the past few decades, the Communicative Language Teaching, or the Communicative Approach, has been overwhelmingly acknowledged as the main stream in English as Second Language or English Foreign Language teaching.

The focus of language teaching also expands from the teacher-centered manipulation of discrete grammatical structures to the student-centered acquisition of communicative competence (Celce-Murcia & Thurrell, 1995). Experts in communicative approach suggest that contextualized and meaningful communication is the best possible practice that language learners can engage in.

However, such approach has not established a foothold in the English education in India, though there has been a very high demand for oral fluency and soft skills. In spite of the call for Communicative Approach in EFL teaching, however, as many researchers noted (E C Eyre, C J Brumfit, K Johnson, H R Mills), the traditional teacher-centered Grammar Translation Method is still the dominant stream in English classrooms. In traditional classrooms of high schools in India, the teachers dominate the floor of speaking throughout the classroom session, and the students simply sit and listen. There is more of Teacher Talk Time and less of Student Talk Time. The students seldom initiate talking.

Numerous studies and educational reports have pointed out that the solitary models of the traditional teaching method tend to make students overly passive and indifferent to what is being taught (Hamm & Adams, 1992). The traditional whole-class lecturing method is found to be one of the major causes of the generally low English proficiency and the declining interest of English learning in India. According to educationalists in India, only few EFL high school learners in India are able to master English, even after five years of studying the target language at high school. Many experts state that after five years of studying English, most Indian students (Local Medium school students) are hardly able to communicate in English because there has been too much teaching and too little learning in a traditional classroom.

With the demand of such a student-centered communicative syllabus and curriculum, what would be the practical alternatives to replace the traditional method so that the students can achieve communicative competence?

METHODOLOGY

This part of the paper presents the methodology that is adopted for this research. In particular it describes every minute account like selection of the participants, how the instructional design is made, what are the methods followed in the collection of the data and how the data analysis is done.

- **Primary Data Collection**

Primary Data collection includes (1) the questionnaire of learning style preference, (2) two oral tasks, (3) the motivational questionnaire, (4) the teacher interview, (5) the student interview, and (6) the scores of the 1st and 2nd monthly examinations.

- **Questionnaires**

In order to understand the learning style preferences of the students for the purpose of heterogeneous grouping in the experimental group, questionnaires will be given to both groups of students before the study. The result collected from this questionnaire will be used as part of the criteria for heterogeneous grouping in the experimental group. The grouping strategy for the experimental group will be that each group should have members of different learning styles, instead of putting students of the same learning styles together in the same group.

- **Oral Tasks**

Two oral tasks involving paired dialogues will be designed to test the participants' oral communicative competence regarding four aspects: (1) the linguistic features, (2) the non-verbal features, (3) the discourse features, and (4) the strategic features. The oral tasks designed in this study are interaction-based tests.

- **Motivational Questionnaire**

In order to understand the students' motivation towards learning English before and after the study, a questionnaire containing 18 items will be framed, adapted from the Motivational Intensity Questionnaire (MIQ) outlined by Gardner (1985).

- **Teachers' Interview**

The interviews will be done on a face-to-face, one-on-one base. Each interview will be about 10 to 15 minutes. The interview will be recorded with the consent of the interviewees. Teachers will also be interviewed at the end of two month-period for their reflection upon the students' language learning and the students' motivation towards learning English as a foreign language. The semi-structured interview will be recorded with the permission of the interviewee.

- **Students' Interview**

Four high-achievers and four low-achievers in the experimental group will be interviewed individually in Telugu about their feelings and comments on cooperative learning. The teachers conduct the semi-structured interview with these eight students individually. The interview will be recorded with the permission of the interviewees.

- **School-Wide Monthly Examinations**

The last but important instrument in this study will include the scores from the first and second monthly examinations held. The major reason for including the scores of the school-wide monthly examination is to examine whether cooperative learning, as many high school teachers worried, would reduce the students' scores on academic achievement as they spend much time doing group activities of speaking, listening, reading, and writing, instead of focusing on the preparation for structure-based written examinations.

- **Secondary Data Collection**

In the process of collecting data, several other sources will be sought to get the needed information for this thesis. To mention a few a) Discussion with the teachers involved in cooperative learning b) Interviews and discussions with the head master c) Ideas from the English staff of high schools d) Discussions with the respective guide. This thesis being empirical exploration, though several books are read on different theories and methods in data collection, most of the ground work will be experimental.

- **Questionnaire and Instructional Design**

The questionnaires are designed to suite to the level of the students. To know the correct feelings of the learners, mother tongue questionnaires will also be prepared. There will be different questionnaires to get the accurate information on the different methods of teaching English. Separate questionnaires will be prepared for the head of the department, head of high school. All the participants are well informed and the written permission will be taken from the head master as well

as the most participants.

The instructional design of cooperative learning method in the experimental group is integrated within the students' regular English curriculum. The teaching materials that the students study are their own prescribed books for the high schools in Andhra Pradesh. The teaching procedures and activities in the control group belong to the traditional method, which involves mainly the Grammar Translation and the Audio-lingual method.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This part of the paper deals with the results of the Cooperative Learning and Language Learning. It analyses the results of the tests while giving reflections of the participants and exhibits the findings. The data collected for analysis to examine the effects of the application of cooperative learning method in this study included (1) the scores of the two oral tasks, (2) the transcription of the videotape of the oral tasks, (3) the grades of the two monthly examinations, (4) the results of the motivational questionnaire, (5) the teacher interview, and (6) the student interview.

For the measurement of the linguistic competence, the scores collected from the two oral tasks were computed to compare the inter- and intra-group differences. The inter-group comparisons were analyzed by *the Independent Samples Tests and the intra-group comparisons by the Paired Samples Statistics*. The results of the t-tests were used for the analysis of the linguistic competence. In addition to the analysis of the linguistic competence measured and analyzed by statistical tool, the performance of the oral tasks were also be videotaped and transcribed for further analysis on the discourse, strategic and non-verbal features of communicative competence that were difficult to identify through the scoring rubric.

The transcription of the videotape on the students' performance was transcribed verbatim for the analysis of discourse competence with regard to the utilization of cohesion markers and the length of pause. The length of each pause was measured and compared. The non-verbal features of smile, eye contact, conversational distance, and the students' reactions to silence was coded and categorized by the researcher and the teacher together.

The Independent Samples Test was utilized to check if there was any significant difference in their scores of the two monthly examinations between the two groups. The scores of the high and low-achievers in each group were computed to compare the inter-group differences.

As for the analysis of the motivational questionnaires, each student's responses to the 18 statements were scored. The statistical results of the questionnaire were compared for inter and intra-group analysis. The Independent Samples Test was utilized for the inter-group analysis and the Paired Samples Test for the intra-group analysis.

The results of the teacher interview were transcribed verbatim in Telugu by the researcher and crosschecked with the interviewees for content validity. The cited entries of the interview were translated into English. The translation of the cited interview was crosschecked with the teacher for content validity. The cited interview was translated into English by the researcher. The English translation of the interview was reviewed by the teacher for content validity.

DISCUSSIONS: EFFECTS OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING

The Cooperative Learning and language learning depicted the effects of the cooperative learning in relation to the students' motivation and achievements. Most Indian students started official English education from elementary onwards. However, different elementary schools in different states in India have different policies about when their pupils should start official English program. Some schools implemented English education from the first grade, some from the third

grade, and some from the fifth grade. When these students with such diverse levels of English proficiency reached high school, to what level should their teachers address in a large class of more than 35 students.

Cooperative learning was a feasible and practical teaching method that put communicative approach into action. Cooperative groups increased opportunities for students to produce and comprehend the target language and to obtain modeling and feedback from their peers as well as their teacher. The application of cooperative learning did not reduce the students' academic achievements in the structure-based school examinations, as many teachers were concerned. Many teachers were worried that cooperative learning might hinder their students' progress in structure-based exams. In a cooperative learning classroom, all students were exposed to a learning environment, which supported and encouraged academic, personal, psychological and social growth.

On the whole, cooperative learning was a feasible teaching method which did not only enhance the students' communicative competence and boost their motivation towards learning English as a foreign language, it also cultivated the students' overall ability as holistic human beings with the facility of caring, sharing, respecting, and cooperating with others. Thus, application of cooperative learning method is strongly recommended for EFL teachers in India in their English classrooms to yield the above discussed effects.

CONCLUSIONS

The data collected for the analysis of the students' communicative competence was based on the design of two interaction-based oral tasks. Though four aspects of oral communicative competence were under investigation, the students' communicative competence in writing, reading, and listening were not measured in this study. Even if the school-wide monthly achievement tests that were collected in this study covered reading, writing, and listening, the content of those tests were more structure-based than communicative oriented. With time and funding permitted, future research might develop reliable and valid measurements to include the four language skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking to examine the results of cooperative learning on EFL learners' overall communicative competence.

Considering all the above mentioned, the conclusions of this research paper are defined here.

- This study brought together the fields of cooperative learning, second language acquisition, and second/foreign language teaching to create optimal schooling experiences for the EFL high school learners in India.
- Cooperative learning method was integrated with the theories from the second language acquisition, i.e. the comprehensible input, the comprehensible output, and the interaction in context, as well as the affective domain of motivation during the process of implementation.
- It is hoped that this empirical study could provide a close link between cooperative learning and the communicative approach. Certain guidelines were proposed to apply cooperative learning to enhance and enable students' language learning.
- By carrying out this study, it is hoped that cooperative learning method could receive more attention and enjoy more popularity among EFL teachers in India. It could actually help the students with communicative competence. Educating high school students with adequate English communicative skills is very important in this modern world of the 21st century to place our learners feel comfortable in this global English village.

The widespread use of cooperative learning is due to a number of factors. It is clearly based on theory, validated by research, and operationalized into clear procedures that educators can use. This combination makes cooperative learning a powerful learning methodology. Cooperative learning can have far reaching results when skillfully applied and practiced. The diverse and positive outcomes that simultaneously result from cooperative efforts have sparked numerous research studies on cooperative learning focused on preventing and treating a wide variety of social problems, and heterogeneity existing in the Indian high schools. Depending upon the conclusions drawn from the study, *Cooperative Learning* is, thus, recommended to be integrated into the High School English instruction in India.

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